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In Common Core, Teachers See Interdisciplinary Opportunities

By [Liana Heitin](#)

Educators around the country are exploring innovative ways to teach the new common-core literacy standards, and some are calling attention to an approach they say is working well: interdisciplinary thematic units.

Whether they've had these types of units in their repertoires for years or are just now jumping into such cross-curricular work, educators say the new standards support this type of teaching in several ways.

First, one of the key instructional shifts associated with the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts is the requirement that students, starting in 5th grade, read more nonfiction than fiction. Some English teachers have lamented the prospect of replacing Shakespeare and Sandra Cisneros with informational texts. But proponents of the common standards point out that, as a footnote in the introduction to the standards explains, the required percentages for nonfiction "reflect the sum of student reading, not just reading in ELA settings." That is, informational texts are expected to be the shared responsibility of teachers "across the grade," potentially creating new opportunities for cross-curricular projects.

In addition, the common standards lay out specific literacy requirements for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects, and they emphasize research and synthesizing skills. Rather than tackling these new objectives in subject-area silos, some teachers are choosing to address them by integrating real-world themes and social issues into projects, and by reaching across hallways to do this work with colleagues.

One Theme, Many Standards

The common core "certainly lends itself to integrated interdisciplinary units," said Bobbi Farrell, a veteran teacher at Messalonskee Middle School in Oakland, Maine. Several years ago, she and her colleagues began moving to a standards-based approach to teaching, in which students go at their own pace and do not receive grades. Instead, kids are responsible for attaining proficiency in each standard. The group built this new approach, which Farrell calls "mass-customized learning," on the common-core standards, which were

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finalized in 2010.

Farrell, who teaches both social studies and language arts, often organizes her instruction around a theme. "For example, we may do a unit on identity," she explained. "Within that, we can look at immigration or social classes within social studies. We can look at such literature as *The Outsiders* within the framework of characterization or point of view." Through the structure the theme provides, she said, students are able to hit a variety of standards, depending on their individual goals. "In a short span of five to six weeks, kids get a massive amount of teaching and learning in that one unit."

While some language arts teachers are simply adding a nonfiction unit to fulfill the new reading requirements, others have found pairing fiction and nonfiction texts under a thematic umbrella to be a more effective way to teach critical reading. "In order to integrate the core in a way that doesn't overtake your class with isolated discrete lessons, this is the way to do it," said Sarah Brown Wessling, the 2010 National Teacher of the Year and a high school English teacher in Johnston, Iowa. "This is the way to get kids deeper into their analysis."

By organizing around "a concept or principle or theme or quest," teachers force students to engage with texts more deeply and compare them to one another. For instance, she said, "instead of thinking about teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I'm teaching the concept of courage. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one text I use. So is a [PBS] Frontline piece, a speech, an article. Putting those texts together in a bundle helps us to work toward conceptual understanding. That's the spirit of the core."

Rob Meza-Ehlert, a 10th grade social studies teacher at the Kearny School of Digital Media and Design in San Diego, explained that his small public high school is centered around interdisciplinary project-based learning. Teachers at the 450-student school, created through a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, work in grade-level teams to have students produce semester-long projects on topics of their choice. Tenth graders pick a social issue—genocide, environmental degradation, or human trafficking, for example—and read selected articles about it in social studies class, using the annotation skills they've learned in English. Then they continue the "research from my class with Socratic seminars in English," Meza-Ehlert explained. "The walls between the two disciplines are broken down. We're developing similar skills with a similar approach." Eventually, students create a project—for instance, a video, brochure, or online game—to demonstrate what they've learned and offer something to the community.

Meza-Ehlert suggested that a strength of this approach is that it helps students see the natural fluidity between subjects. "I hear kids in my class talking about connections to English and science. As soon as kids are doing that on their own without being asked, you know what you're doing is working," he said.

A nine-year veteran at the school, Meza Ehlert says the common-core standards mesh well with the school's project-based learning model. "We actually have a pretty good foundation because a lot of what we've already been doing matches [the common core]. When I look at the common core ... there are no shocks."

Logistical Barriers

Even so, Kathy Glass, a curriculum and instruction consultant in the San Francisco area, and author of books on mapping curriculum units to the common core for both primary and secondary grades, emphasizes that such units are not in-and-of themselves aligned with the common core. Teachers still need to do the hard work of adaptation. "I did interdisciplinary units 20 years ago," she said. But, to teach

them today with the common core, "I'd have to say, 'Hmm. ... Let me look at the resources I used. Were they appropriately complex? Let me look at the questions I had. Were they text dependent?' It's all very specific to how rich the interdisciplinary unit was."

In addition, there are, of course, logistical barriers to this kind of teaching.

For Farrell, teaching thematically often forces her to teach historical events out of order, "which, particularly in social studies, has been difficult," she said. "You think of history more in terms of chronology. One of the issues we're facing is how to know if we're filling in all those gaps."

The cross-subject-area, collaborative aspect can be tough to pull off as well, especially at the high school level. In elementary schools, where teachers are responsible for multiple disciplines, or in middle schools that are organized around teams, there are often more opportunities for teachers to collaborate on units. "If a school is organized for it, it makes a lot of sense," said Wessling. "My school doesn't happen to be organized for that. ... Certainly the ways that high schools are traditionally organized makes it more difficult."

While his high school has the luxuries of a small staff and flexible scheduling, however, Meza-Ehlert argues that all teachers can implement interdisciplinary work to some extent. "The product doesn't have to be some project. For us what makes it work best is having big questions and topics that cross multiple disciplines."

He suggests that teachers "start small, where they're comfortable. Unpack one quote that is a challenging quote to unpack, starting in English and finishing in history class. ... If the structures aren't in place, look for natural places of connection. If one other teacher has 10 to 15 shared students, try one reading together on one theme. The little things grow into something larger."

Finding Units

Resources are also available to help teachers create such thematic units across disciplines.

Facing History and Ourselves, a civic-learning organization, has been offering free curricular support to teachers for almost four decades. The Brookline, Mass.-based nonprofit provides **units and lessons on themes such as racism, democracy, and prejudice** on its website. "Our model has always been to teach a piece of literature situated in a historical context," said Jocelyn Stanton, senior program associate for special projects. "To understand the world around that piece of literature, you bring in primary sources, graphs, first-hand accounts"—all of which can count toward the common standards' nonfiction reading requirements.

"On the flipside, we've also pushed history teachers to not only look at primary sources and textbooks but to bring in works of poetry and short stories to complement the time period," Stanton said. "By reading a poem from a Holocaust survivor, you deepen your understanding. I think the common core is basically asking teachers to do that."

While many of Facing History's units were written before the common standards existed, Stanton said they are philosophically and practically in line with what the core



requires. "The idea of putting a text in front of students and asking them to deconstruct and find meaning, to read closely, to ask questions, that's how we started. It's somewhat ironic that we've been sort of set up for this [ie., the new standards] for a long time." The group is now working to directly align its units to the standards.

Emily Chiariello, a teaching and learning specialist with the Southern Poverty Law Center's **Teaching Tolerance** program in Montgomery, Ala., is in the midst of writing a "literacy-based anti-bias curriculum" for both language arts and social studies teachers, which should be finished by the fall. Chiariello describes theme-based interdisciplinary units as "the best for every number of reasons." She said that these units mimic the kind of learning through reading students will do as adults—for instance reading the newspaper to learn about politics, or looking at maps and magazine articles to learn about gardening.

"Maybe this is also what the common core is trying to get us to realize—that these boundaries between disciplines are false," Chiariello said. "They're not in the real world. I hope people can embrace those walls are coming down."

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